

# **Responsible Entrepreneurship: Altruism, Sacrifice, Solidarity and Innovation Among Select Philippine SMEs During COVID-19**

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## **Abstract**

The pandemic has had a catastrophic effect on businesses worldwide. Many micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) proved unable to cope with the detrimental business-related effects of the pandemic. In an endeavour to evaluate whether responsible entrepreneurship was being practiced even under these trying circumstances, we evaluated the data obtained from in-depth interviews, field notes, and published materials using the multiple research case study design. Our findings reveal that the selected Philippine MSMEs demonstrated responsible entrepreneurship through altruism, sacrifice, solidarity and innovation even under trying conditions, largely due to the zeal of the entrepreneur. Future areas for research are presented.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, MSMEs, responsible entrepreneurship

## Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted the Philippines' micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). According to a study conducted by the Asian Development Bank (Shinozaki, 2020), Philippine MSMEs had to contend with declined domestic demand. They struggled with disruptions to their production and supply chains because of strict lockdowns and mobility restrictions imposed by the Philippine government.

Various government initiatives, such as issuing policies about the extension of payments of loans and rentals, labor wage subsidies, decreasing interest rates, and the support extended helped mitigate the adverse effects. However, government efforts fell short as MSMEs had to rely heavily on their funds and informal financing sources throughout the pandemic. According to the ADB study (Shinozaki, 2020), over 70.6 percent of Philippine MSMEs were forced to temporarily close as a result of the pandemic — ranking the country first in terms of business closures, followed by Laos (61.1 percent), Indonesia (48.6 percent), and Thailand (41.1 percent) in Southeast Asia. Additionally, 58.8 percent of Philippine MSMEs reported no revenue, while 28% reported decline in revenues of more than 30 percent.

The phrase “*every man for himself*” would have been the most logical approach during times like these. However, in our research study, we saw how some businesses, even as they strived to keep themselves afloat, attempted to mitigate the sufferings of specific sectors of society through responsible behaviour towards various stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, fellow entrepreneurs, local communities). We were curious about this seemingly illogical phenomenon and decided to investigate further. This paper illustrates how selected Philippine entrepreneurs manifested this responsible behaviour amidst the COVID-19 crisis.

## **Overview of Literature**

### **Responsible Entrepreneurship**

Responsibility, which was once merely a byproduct of doing business, has recently taken centre stage (Tiba, van Rijnsoever, & Hekkert, 2019). Today, many well-established companies (i.e., Nestle and Shell) across various industries and locales are embracing socially responsible practices (Tiba et al., 2019). In 2016, three out of four CEOs felt that companies would measure success in the future in terms other than financial profit (PWC, 2016). The pandemic has changed the priorities of CEOs, with social responsibility metrics like gender representation, and racial and ethnicity diversity in hiring are now seen as standard together with traditional metrics (PWC, 2022).

Despite this mainstream acceptance, the scholarly literature has paid little attention to commercial entrepreneur responsibility (Tiba et al., 2019). In a systematic literature review, the researchers found that employee well-being, customer preferences, and civil society as stakeholders receive less consideration in the responsible entrepreneurship literature (Tiba et al., 2019). Environmental challenges and their interplay with financial and social issues are also understudied (Tiba et al., 2019).

This last finding is also consistent with the conceptual literature review done by Vallaster, Kraus, Kailer, and Baldwin (2019), where they found only 23 articles on responsible entrepreneurship, interpreted as sustainable development entrepreneurship. This systematic literature review identified and discussed five research streams that distinguish responsible entrepreneurs from purely for-profit entrepreneurs. These five streams are, walking the line between profit creation and value creation for society; business models of responsible entrepreneurs; their role in transforming society; getting ready to innovate responsibly; and the role of market incentives in fostering sustainable business practices (Vallaster et al., 2019).

Interest in responsible entrepreneurship has been growing. Xie and Wu (2021) studied the link between responsible entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurial success. Among their significant findings are that female entrepreneurial success is positively connected with responsible entrepreneurship and that this relationship is mediated by female entrepreneurs'

ability to see opportunities (Xie & Wu, 2021). Furthermore, Xie and Wu (2021) did a post hoc analysis and found that responsible entrepreneurship positively impacts entrepreneurial success for both male and female entrepreneurs. However, this impact is greater for female than male entrepreneurs.

## **Altruism**

Broadly defined, altruism means the sacrifice of one's well-being for the sake of others (Velamuri, 2002). Viewed this way, entrepreneurship is seen as largely antithetical to altruism. In the world of economic action, entrepreneurship is the embodiment of individualism (Velamuri, 2002). The capitalist concepts of economic efficiency and profit maximization that are so prominent in today's corporate world do not fit well with an unselfish concern for others (Kanungo & Conger, 1993; Smith, 2008). However, recent phenomena such as the notions of corporate social responsibility and social entrepreneurship have ushered in the acceptance of altruism in the realm of businesses (Lähdesmäki & Takala, 2012).

## **Sacrifice**

Sacrifice in the context of entrepreneurship has been conceptualized as an owner's willingness to sacrifice valuables for their small business to grow. Owner sacrifice was studied as a critical variable by Kozan, Oksoy, and Ozsoy (2012) for predicting the dynamics of small business growth. Using the Conservation of Resources Theory, the researchers were able to identify three different types of sacrifice - personal, financial, and relational. Kozan and colleagues (2012) studied their relation to business growth on data collected through structured interviews conducted in 852 small firms in thirteen cities in Turkey. Their study reveals that personal sacrifices in time and effort had a positive effect on continuous growth, both singularly, and in interaction with the firm's environment, size, and strategic planning. Sacrifices in personal finances were negatively associated with continuous growth, which is interpreted as an outcome of internal financing and risk-avoidance by Turkish firms (Kozan et al., 2012). Notice that owners sacrifice because they want their businesses to succeed, which is aligned with their self-interest.

However, the sacrifice observed in this research is better described as prosocial behaviour, which is studied in psychology. In numerous studies, prosocial behaviour has been

found to be generally helpful in the relationships and well-being of people (e.g., Aknin et al., 2013; Aknin, Broesch, Hamlin, & Van de Vondervoot, 2015). On the other hand, sacrifice might be considered a unique sort of prosocial behaviour because it comprises someone sacrificing a personal objective or preference for the sake of another (Day & Impett, 2018). In this case, sacrifice is defined as putting one's immediate self-interest aside to benefit another person (Day & Impett, 2016). Thus, sacrifice differs from just assisting and supporting another person in that it entails the giving of a benefit while putting one's own goals on hold (e.g., Day & Impett, 2016). From this perspective, we can view sacrifice as a deeper type of altruistic behaviour.

In their meta-analysis on the link between sacrifice and relational and personal well-being, Righetti, Sakaluk, Faure, and Impett (2020) ask if benefits exist when prosocial behaviour is costly for an individual. Although diverse theoretical theories indicate that sacrifice is either positively or negatively connected with personal and relational well-being, research studies have been inconsistent in this area (Righetti et al., 2020). To evaluate the association between sacrifice and personal as well as relationship well-being, for both the individual who makes the sacrifice and their romantic partner, we did a meta-analytic synthesis of 82 data sets with 9,547 effect sizes ( $N = 32,053$ ). We looked at four distinct aspects of sacrifice (i.e., willingness to sacrifice, behavioural sacrifice, satisfaction with sacrifice, and costs of sacrifice). The findings demonstrate various aspects related to happiness in distinct ways. A person's readiness to sacrifice was found to be favourably associated with their own personal and relationship well-being and their partner's relationship well-being.

Behavioural sacrifice was found to be inversely related to personal well-being. Individual and couple well-being were positively associated with sacrifice satisfaction. The costs of sacrifice were negatively associated with one's personal and relationship well-being, and the well-being of one's partner's relationship (Righetti et al., 2020). We can apply these concepts to entrepreneurial responsibility, especially in a crisis.

## **Solidarity**

Solidarity is the sense of belonging to a group, a 'we,' who view and deal with problems and issues in terms of common concerns (Spinosa, Flores, & Dreyfus, 1995). During crises where everything is uncertain, a typical business strategy is to just focus on one's operations and make sure that the business stays afloat during these uncertain times.

## **Innovation**

The pandemic affected industries differently. It proved to be quite disastrous for tourism, hospitality, and related industries. One out of five tourism and accommodation businesses permanently closed during the pandemic (World Bank, 2020). These industries had to rethink ways to maintain relevance during the pandemic.

## **Methods**

### **Case Study Research Design**

We picked the case study research approach because we were looking into a current phenomenon that occurred in a real-life setting over which we had little control. Because analytical conclusions derived from numerous cases “will be more powerful than those coming from a single case alone” (p. 53), we used a multiple-case design (Yin, 2014). We recognize that case studies are only generalizable to theoretical concepts but not entire populations. As a result, we cannot prove causal or correlational relationships, but we can explain when or how they exist (Yin, 2014).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We derived data from the ENTRESILIENCE Project (Basic Movement, Everything Green Consulting and Trading, Inc., Pallet Reimagined, and The *Murang Gulay* Shop). Aside from this, we also drew data from published sources about the actions taken by some other businesses that were not part of the Project (MAD Travel and The Sunny Side Group). For the cases included in the project, the researchers employed a secondary analysis of qualitative data (SAQD) consisting of transcriptions, field notes, and other published materials. According to Heaton (2004), SAQD data is “the methodology for the study of non-naturalistic or artefactual data derived from previous studies, such as field notes, observational records, and tapes and transcripts of interviews and focus groups” (p. 15).

The primary data source was a database of interview transcripts, field notes, and published materials from the ENTRESILIENCE Project, of which we were members. The ENTRESILIENCE Project was a multi-country research collaboration that aimed to understand how entrepreneurs in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United Kingdom

adapted to the COVID crisis and even turned some of the difficulties into opportunities. The parent project took a longitudinal approach, conducting three planned semi-structured interviews. We also gathered secondary data from the relevant online sources and scholarly articles. The variety of secondary sources aided in data triangulation, thereby improving data quality.

The ENTRESILIENCE Project conducted in-depth interviews with twelve entrepreneurs using a theoretical sampling framework developed by the team. There were 12 case studies in the project, including the four businesses considered for the present study. We deemed four businesses, Basic Movement, Everything Green Consulting and Trading, Inc., Pallet Reimagined, and The *Murang Gulay* Shop appropriate for the current study. The existing data on these businesses was sufficient to assist the team in achieving their research objectives. For the cases not included in the ENTRESILIENCE Project, we reviewed published materials about the companies.

After collecting the data, we went through the materials and created case descriptions. We relied heavily on the qualitative information from our interviews and research online, and coded the data that demonstrated entrepreneurial responsibility. From these coded data, we categorized the actions of the MSMEs under themes. The following section discusses our findings.

## **Short Profiles of the Selected Philippine MSMEs**

### **Basic Movement**

Basic Movement is a e-commerce fashion business based in the Philippines. Its founder, Esme Palaganas, is currently taking her Master's in Innovation, Creativity, and Leadership at City, University of London. Esme continues to operate the business remotely with the assistance of her fashion studio manager based in the Philippines. Basic Movement aims to curate the work of different fashion designers in the country, and provide them the platform to distribute their products and share their craft.

### **Everything Green Consulting and Trading, Inc.**

Everything Green Trading and Consultancy, Inc., or simply Everything Green, was founded by Camille Albarracin in 2018. It is an eco start-up that provides end-to-end innovative business solutions and concepts at the community level. This start-up aims to revolutionize the hospitality industry by ensuring sustainability of the industry's core business processes.

## **MAD Travel**

Make A Difference Travel (or simply MAD Travel) is a social enterprise founded by Thomas Graham and Rafael Dionisio. The social enterprise uses sustainable social tourism to generate possibilities for and with neglected people. Before the pandemic, the company offered their trip package, Tribes and Treks, bringing local and foreign tourists to Yangil Village in Zambales, home of the Aeta tribe, where visitors got a peek into the local way of life. The tour included a tree-planting exercise that benefited the Aetas' 3,000-hectare ancestral property. Locals were able to supplement their income by selling organic fruits, honey, bracelets, bamboo whistles, straws, and little bow-and-arrow sets to tourists during these visits (Aguinaldo, 2020).

## **Pallet Reimagined**

Pallet Reimagined is a furniture-making company established by Louisa Gonzaga and Renz Nisperos. The company was founded in July 2020 at the height of the pandemic to provide job opportunities to public utility vehicle drivers who lost their jobs due to the strict restrictions on mobility. The company fabricates plant racks, kitchen, and office furniture.

## **The Murang Gulay Shop (The Affordable Vegetables Shop)**

Founded by Reden Rojas in 2018, The Murang Gulay Shop is an online vegetable trader and retailer located in Marikina, Philippines. It is a social enterprise that buys various agricultural produce at fair prices from farmers in the provinces and sells these in Metro Manila for less than or equal to ongoing market prices. TMGS aims to ensure that farmers get paid fairly for their produce and that consumers in Metro Manila also get fair prices for the vegetables they consume.

## **The Sunny Side Group**

Founded by husband and wife duo Emmanuel Nowie Potenciano and Odette Potenciano, The Sunny Side Group comprises several brands and restaurants - The Sunny Side Café, Spicebird (known for grilled meats and Piri-Piri sauce), Coco Mama (vegan coconut ice-cream), Supermagic Burgers (Kitayama beef patties), Mochiko (mochi ice-cream), Please, Senpai (Japanese food), and Tabi-Tabi (Filipino flavors) (Tatlerasi.com). The group started with The Sunny Side Cafe, a neighbourhood hangout serving comfort food in a popular tourist island



destination. The Cafe quickly became a local favourite, serving all-day breakfast, baked goods, and specialty coffee. The duo expanded their offerings to what is now known as The Sunny Side Group (Francisco, 2021).

## **Case Analysis and Discussion**

From the review of the interview transcripts, field notes, and published materials, we saw that the cases we selected demonstrated different types of entrepreneurial responsibility that may be classified under the themes of altruism, sacrifice, solidarity, and innovation. We now discuss each of these categories in detail.

### **Altruism**

The Philippine businesses interviewed exhibited altruism during COVID-19 in different ways. Among the most common altruistic acts were donations and emotional support. Donations could be physical (e.g., excess goods, food) as well as monetary (e.g., contributing to fundraisers and allocating a percentage of profits to donation efforts). Emotional support consists mainly of giving advice to other entrepreneurs and receiving advice from more experienced peers — both at no upfront cost.

For instance, Pallet Reimagined was founded on the altruistic motives of Louisa Gonzaga and Renz Nisperos to help public utility vehicle drivers rendered jobless by the strict community lockdowns imposed at the start of the pandemic. Moved by the driver's plight, the owners decided to buy wood pallets as the raw materials to start a furniture shop. Once the drivers built the furniture, Louisa and Renz took care of selling these on Facebook. Louisa and Renz gave all the revenue to these drivers.

*Actually, at first, we don't think of it as a business. The mission is to help them. We said at that time we were also struggling then because we didn't have work until now. So, we said in all our small ways, maybe we'll give some for the capital, and we just help them to post [in social media] ... It was not really in our plan, we said we only wanted to help at that time, because my partner feels very sorry towards their drivers. Some of the drivers are stuck in their garage. I said to myself, 'I will find something that we can do.' - Louisa Gonzaga*

The furniture was a hit, and the company was overwhelmed with orders. The revenue earned enabled the drivers to have money to send to their families living in the provinces. Louisa and Renz did not envision running the business long-term. The company was founded to help drivers. The company's success led to the partners managing the business long term.

Another example is Basic Movement, a fashion business that actively participated in fundraising activities. The founder stated that the company allocated five percent of its sales for the small fund it organized. The business usually sends money whenever any groups or organizations require funds. During the height of the pandemic in the Philippines, the business donated to fundraisers for buying alcohol and medical supplies for healthcare and frontline workers.

We have also observed businesses that provide physical donations such as excess goods and food. The *Murang Gulay Shop* (The Affordable Vegetables Shop), for instance, donates sizable quantities of extra goods to various individuals and groups. On one occasion, the business gave 5,000 tomatoes to a community during the pandemic. The company also donated PHP 1,000 to 2,000 worth of vegetables to an anonymous group of people. The founder shared how the people who received the donations would usually be surprised with the number of excess goods.

## **Sacrifice**

Dine-in restaurants were one of the hardest-hit businesses during the pandemic, with the ones in tourist spots being doubly hit. This was the case for The Sunny Side Group, which consists of various dine-in restaurants located in the most famous island destination in the country – Boracay. The restaurants were forced to stop operations at the start of the pandemic.

The Potencianos, the Group's owners, had intended to wait until the pandemic subsided before acting. They changed their minds once the government extended the travel ban indefinitely. They set up pop-ups of the Sunny Side Café, which served its most popular dishes, and Coco Mama, a coconut dessert shop. The idea was to appeal to individuals who had dined at their Boracay restaurants, providing them with a "true beach vibe" without leaving the city. The couple relocated their restaurant crew to Manila solely to keep them employed to accomplish

this. They covered the cost of their employees' boat tickets and swab tests and the rent for an apartment close to their eateries.

Aside from this, the owners used the Group's Facebook page to solicit funds for initiatives such as supporting the initiatives of other similar-minded businesses. They also supported feeding programmes and donated reusable personal protective equipment for front liners. Aside from this, the Group also conducted feeding programmes in its community. These initiatives were undertaken even though the Group was short on revenues as they were closed for business.

### **Solidarity**

When the pandemic first hit, The *Murang Gulay* Shop was negatively affected only by the delays in transporting the vegetables, caused by tighter boundary controls and strict rules on logistics. In contrast to the experience of most small businesses, the Shop experienced a boom in demand for its products as it is an online vegetable retailer. However, the founder, Reden Rojas, was worrying instead of celebrating.

*[At the start of the pandemic], we were worried about how we're going to help the community. On the first day, we hired many in-house riders, we made the RFID, logistics, etc. - Reden Rojas*

Rojas made these business decisions to ensure that the business would be able to accommodate the exponential increase in demand. Rojas was acutely aware of what his customers felt. He wanted to lessen the anxieties brought about by the pandemic by making sure that the business could fulfill orders.

Despite his busy schedule, Rojas became active in various community organizations in order to show solidarity. Rojas says that he is a member of multiple community organizations that provide relief and community service. He also became part of a volunteer group and the *barangay* (Philippine community-level governments) committees.

On the other hand, Basic Movement showed solidarity in different ways - community empowerment and being one with employees. Given that fashion was not considered a priority industry, Basic Movement exemplified community empowerment by working with a community of fashion designers in the Philippines to improve their craft and inspiring others to do the same.

*Through those years, I still found passion in terms of helping designers because I know there's a lack of a platform for designers who want to go into business. Business back then wasn't really talked about ... My whole point for Basic Movement is I want to empower young Filipino designers. - Esme Palaganas*

Basic Movement also exhibited solidarity with its employees. It communicated with its employees on essentials to identify different ways to assist them during COVID-19. The founder explained:

*As much as possible, I try to talk to them [during] breaks. [I ask them] what is happening inside your homes now, how is your [son or daughter] working in the hospital, where their family members are residing, if they have someone with them in the house and if they have work — things like those. I [want to] know what their situation is in their home life, so I know how to help them back. - Esme Palaganas*

## **Innovation**

The pandemic affected industries differently, as mentioned earlier. Tourism, hospitality, and related industries were severely affected, with a fifth of all tourism and accommodation businesses seeing permanent closure (World Bank, 2020). Despite this, however, some MSMEs, like MAD Travel and Everything Green, found innovative ways to continue operations and demonstrate entrepreneurial responsibility.

Before the pandemic, MAD Travel brought local and foreign tourists to Sitio Yangil in Zambales — home of an Aeta community — where guests were provided a glimpse at the locals' way of life. Part of the tour was a tree-planting activity, which supported the reforestation of the 3,000-hectare ancestral lands of the Aetas. Because of the guided tours, the locals could augment

their income by selling organically-grown fruits, honey, bracelets, bamboo whistles, bamboo straws, and mini bow-and-arrow sets to tourists (Aguinaldo, 2020).

During the lockdown, other tour operators closed their doors, but MAD Travel came up with new business concepts to aid its partner towns which had suddenly lost their source of income. Feed the Farmers Today, Fund Tomorrow's Forest is one of these concepts, a global crowdfunding endeavour in which each tree purchased compensates for the Aeta's labor in planting it. MAD Travel launched MAD Market, an online delivery business that sources products from farmers in Benguet, Davao, and Nueva Ecija. It also launched MAD Courses, an e-learning programme with courses on innovation, sustainability, and social enterprise (Habaradas, 2021).

*We identified some time ago that... we're a platform that connects people. When you look at it more broadly like that... then you see that even when tourism has dried up, and we all remain pretty slow for, let's say the next six months at least, we're now looking in a broader sense at our mission. We still believe that there's something very special in our communities and our community partners.* - Thomas Graham, as cited in Aguinaldo, 2021

Everything Green had to close temporarily. Orders for the company's ecologically friendly hotel slippers were canceled as the company's target market (hotels and resorts) cut back on operations. Everything Green thought about how it may support disadvantaged groups and employees with disabilities (PWDs). The company's owner, Camille Albarracin, adds, "We had to come up with a crowdfunding initiative to provide for the requirements of our personnel." Albaraccin decided to create and sell other products, like fashion accessories and wearables, to keep the firm going a few months into the lockdown. She also started working on her e-commerce platform, which would allow Everything Green to go from a business-to-business to a business-to-consumer model.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Studies**

Before the pandemic, the notion of entrepreneurial responsibility had been limited to the ideas of corporate social responsibility and social enterprises. Discussions around these two

concepts portray entrepreneurially responsible acts as aligned with the strategy or the mission of businesses and ultimately benefit them in the long run. In simple terms, entrepreneurial responsibility is primarily driven by self-interest.

During crises, businesses are expected to take action to keep themselves viable/resilient. No one will fault businesses for acting in a purely selfish fashion. However, as illustrated, selected Philippine MSMEs demonstrated responsible behaviour even during extreme situations. These responsible behaviours can be driven by the personal values of the entrepreneurs, how intertwined they are with their communities, and their desire to do good for others. We see how the notion of entrepreneurial responsibility expands into something broader and more profound. The boundaries of entrepreneurial responsibility have now expanded beyond the organization and into the entire community.

Given the superficial treatment of the concept of altruism and the lack of discussion about entrepreneurial sacrifice viewed from the perspective of psychology, it will be helpful for future studies to expand the discussions on these fronts to include for-profit small businesses. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with a reset button that reshapes how various societal actors interact with one another.

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